Assassin's widow remains an enigma after 25 years

By Hugh Aynesworth
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ROCKWALL, Texas

Marina Oswald Porter, Lee Harvey Oswald's widow, has been many things to many people.

Twenty-five years after being thrust into the spotlight with her homemade haircut, peasantlike clothes and two small babies, the Russian-born woman has endured, and carved a life out of all the mayhem.

In some ways, at 47, she has become very Americanized; in others she retains the somewhat furtive, distrustful and frugal attitudes she picked up in her native land.

Though adequate in English, Marina retains her distinct Russian dialect. Still thin and slight with sparkling eyes, she feels most at home with a cup of coffee and an ever-present cigarette. She can be witty and engaging or brusque and chilly, depending on the occasion.

She still does not drive an automobile.

Where she originally — and convincingly — contended that she believed Oswald had shot the president by himself, for himself, today she claims that she believes Jack Ruby killed her husband to cover up a Mafia-induced conspiracy. And she says she is no longer sure of her husband's role, if any.

In 1981, when she gave permission for a British author to have Oswald's body dug up and re-autopsied, she said that she believed that the body might have been stolen or switched. She was leaning toward a Russian conspiracy that year.

After the autopsy — performed by four eminent pathologists — showed conclusively the body that was buried in 1963 was still there and that the fingerprints matched those of Oswald's Marine records before he defected to the Soviet Union, conspiracy theorists have convinced Marina that "questions" remain about the autopsy.

Mrs. Porter — she's been that for 23 years now — admits she has no answers, no special information. The metamorphosis from terrified, guilt-ridden, accepting immigrant to mature, savvy survivor was almost certain to come to pass.

Some claim that Marina is simply exorcising long-felt guilt. For her to claim that Oswald was innocent or had been forced to be involved, they say, is to absolve herself of responsibility for the two years they lived together during which he shot at a right-wing leader, killed the president and threatened to shoot or bomb others.

From the start, the American people dealt with Marina with ambiguity. Pity and concern promulgated thousands of letters stuffed with cash and checks during those first few months.

But an aura of distrust grew and lingered as she apparently lied to FBI agents and conveniently "forgot" to tell all to the Warren Commission.

Marina Oswald Porter

When important matters, such as Oswald's plan to shoot at Richard Nixon, were told first in The Dallas Morning News rather than to the Warren probers, things began to get sticky for Marina.

As disbelief in the "official" Warren findings began to proliferate, she was accused often of complicity. Most of those original conspiracy themes centered on alleged Soviet responsibility, and she became a natural target.

Some investigators and psychiatrists, searching for Oswald's motivation, viewed Marina as a nagging, demanding woman who drove Oswald to extreme lengths to get her attention.

Some felt the weak, vulnerable Oswald might not have pursued such a disastrous course had Marina been civil to him the night before, when she berated him and refused his amorous advances.

Marina told this writer several years ago that she did not accept this condemnation. "He was going to do what he was going to do," she said. "It is foolish to think I could stop him."

In post-assassination months, she would be soundly criticized for her alleged heavy drinking and barhopping and demands to be paid for most interviews — interpreted by some as too capitalistic.

Also noticed and discussed was that many who had been kind to the Russian woman were pushed, partially by her business advisers, occasionally by Marina herself, out of her orbit.

Marguerite Oswald, the accused assassin's mother, who lived in Fort Worth, was at loggerheads with Marina from the day of the assassination until she died.

Brother Robert Oswald, who had helped Lee and Marina financially in Russia and took them in when they first arrived in the United States in June 1962, seldom was welcome at Marina's after the assassination. They broke completely in 1981 when Robert bitterly opposed the exhumation of his brother's body.

Problems between Marina and Marguerite mainly concerned money: Marina had received about $70,000 in donations, another $20,000 from LIFE magazine for permission to print Oswald's famed "Russian Diary" in mid-1964 and several other smaller "honoraria" for her thoughts and remembrances.

"Who does she think she is?" demanded Marguerite in a 1967 phone call to this writer. "She's nothing but Russian trash, capitalizing on my son's life and death."

Marina often commented about Mrs. Oswald's repeated claims that her son was innocent of killing Mr. Kennedy, "nothing more than a patsy" and an FBI informer.

"She knows better than that," Marina said on more than one occasion. "I think she just is after money."

Oddly enough, Marina seems to be saying the same things now.

Marina's life with former electronics worker Kenneth Porter, a tall Texan who rode up on his horse to meet Marina in 1965, seems close and comfortable, according to friends here. They were married later that year.

The two Oswald girls, who used the Porter name since starting school, are now grown, as is the son Marina and Kenneth had in 1966.

June Lee, soon 27, is vice president of a Dallas construction company. Rachel, 25 last month, is attending a nearby university. Mark, 22, works at an area garage. In 1974 the Porters were divorced. Though Kenneth moved back in several years ago, they have not remarried.

With what remained of the donations, the Porters purchased a Dallas bar. "Ken's Place" failed to make it financially, and they reportedly took a loss when they unloaded it.

Other than when Marina collaborated with Priscilla Johnson on her life story in the 1970s and when she sued The National Enquirer and won a $51,000 out-of-court settlement in 1982, things have been quiet at the Porter home.

There was a flurry when the Porters could not get the videotape of the Oswald exhumation returned to them several years after the re-autopsy.

But, according to Rockwall lawyer Brett Hall, that videotape was delivered to Marina "several weeks ago." Since the early 1970s, the Porters have lived in a farmhouse they built on a 17-acre plot about 30 miles east of Dallas in the community of McLendon in Rockwall County.

Henry Wade, the now-retired Dallas district attorney who successfully convicted Ruby in 1964, has a farm not far from where the Porters live.

"She used to come over every once in a while to talk about things," Mr. Wade said last week of Marina, "but I haven't seen her lately."